

Waukegan News Sun, November 14, 2005

WAUKEGAN - It was a Nov. 11 bathed in unseasonable warmth and also filled with more emotion than usual, as special ceremonies brought a touch of Memorial Day to Veterans Day.

Hundreds of people assembled in silence Friday morning on the brick pavers of the new Veterans Memorial Plaza at Washington and West streets, honoring not only local veterans but also each and every one of Waukegan's war dead, whose names were posted in bronze and read aloud for the record.

Civil War re-enactor Rich Denikas of Waukegan read the 23 names from the Civil War, from John Adams to S. Augustus Wood. Homer Dahringer American Legion Post 281 commander Lloyd Cunningham read the two names from the Spanish-American War, Percy Amet and Benjamin Jones.

City spokesman David Motley read the names of all 25 World War I dead, from Fred Ahlgrim to Charles F. Wilder. The 154 names from World War II, from Stanley J. Akramas to Maurice E. Zens, were read by a roster of six speakers, including four members of the Waukegan High School Bulldog JrROTC program. Former Mayor Bill Durkin read from a list that included his cousin, Thomas Durkin.

U.S. Army veteran John Robinson read the seven names from the Korean War, from Leo R. Briseno to Stephen T. Urtamo. Air Force veteran David Ward and Navy veteran A.J. "Tony" Figueroa read the names of 30 Vietnam War dead, from Marcus E. Arneson to Jon Woodard.

And then there was a final name to be read, from the War on Terrorism. Thomas Giaimo was called to the stage, and tears welled freely as a Waukegan father paid public tribute to his son.

After walking slowly and with effort to the speaker's platform, Giaimo took a deep breath and quietly said "1st Lt. David L. Giaimo." He offered a salute, turned and walked back to his seat as

the crowd applauded.

The solemn honor roll and Giaimo's tribute were highlights during nearly two hours of ceremonies that began at 10 a.m. with a parade from the corner of Genesee Street and Grand Avenue in downtown Waukegan. Most spectators gathered at the new plaza, which filled to capacity by the time all the parade participants had filed in around 10:30.

While the Navy Band Great Lakes played patriotic tunes that included a medley of themes from the service branches, visitors inspected the \$600,000 plaza's various features, including a two-ton granite sphere that floats effortlessly on a bubbling bed of water.

Dotted around the surface of the plaza are 12-by-12-inch pavers engraved with memorials and testimonials to local veterans, each with a different sentiment expressed:

"Dedicated to Lance Corporal Walter C. Griffith USMC. Semper Fidelis."

"In memory of Judge Minard E. Hulse - 1895-2001. WWI veteran. From the Thursday Morning Men's Bible Study."

"Dedicated to Frank Loquidis, WWII veteran. From your loving children, Carol, Pat, Shirley and Tim."

"George L. Harlow, Tech Sergeant, U.S. Army Air Corps, 8th Air Force, Tibenham, England. Aerial gunner, radio operator, prisoner of war."

Standing above one particular paver to take a photo with a digital camera, Carol Sittler said that it began as a gift for her husband, Robert.

"I gave it to my husband for our 50th anniversary. I told him I didn't know what else to get him," she said of the \$200 paver. "Then he decided to add his father, who enlisted in World War I and was drafted for World War II."

And so the final version reads "Robert Sittler, US Navy, Korean War. Frank Sittler, US Army WWI, US Navy WWII."

Noting that the pavers are still available for purchase, Carol Sittler said "it's good that so many people are here today. I think that the bricks will fill in once they see that they're here."

When the Navy band wrapped up its performance, event emcee Joe Favaro, president of the Waukegan Park District Board, welcomed the crowd by commenting on "what a great day the Lord has given us to celebrate the men and women (who) served, and some of whom gave their lives."

"When I was a kid, I looked forward to the 11th because it was a day off. I didn't realize the importance of (Veterans Day) until I lost an uncle in the Battle of the Bulge," added Favaro, who expressed wish that the new plaza will "serve as a revival for the honoring of our veterans."

Special honors were reserved for one veteran in particular - Paul Eagon of Waukegan, who served in the U.S. Army during the final months of the war in Europe and helped occupy Germany following V-E Day. In a move that was a deeply kept secret around the city this week, Eagon was awarded the Bronze Star by U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park.

"Paul Eagon, are you here? Could you please step forward?" said Kirk, snapping Eagon to attention as the veteran sat deep in the crowd with his wife, Elaine, who was in on the surprise.

After the Eagons made it to the platform, Kirk said Paul Eagon approached his office in the past "and said, 'I think I'm entitled to four medals.' Well, we looked up his records, and Paul was entitled to eight medals."

One of them was the Bronze Star for valor in combat, and Kirk pinned it to Eagon's chest while describing him as a "proud hero of Waukegan."

Asked to speak, Eagon said "I'm speechless" but managed an understated thanks.

"I am quite surprised. I knew that a while back we had asked about those medals, but I didn't think (Kirk) had all that information," Eagon said, adding a sentiment shared by many in the sun-drenched plaza.

"I'm glad we're here today," he said. "It's a beautiful day."